



Empire and Slavery in American Literature, 1820-1865

Eric J. Sundquist

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The flourishing of pre-Civil War literature known as the American Renaissance occurred in a volatile context of national expansion and sectional strife. Canonical writers such as Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Henry David Thoreau, as well as those more recently acclaimed, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, emerged amidst literature devoted to questions of nationalism, exploration, empire, the frontier, and slavery. This outpouring included some of the most important early works in African American, American Indian, and Chicana/Chicano literature. *Empire and Slavery in American Literature, 1820-1865* tells the story of this exceptionally vibrant and wide-ranging multicultural "renaissance" of our national literature.

Scores of diaries, reports, and memoirs, in addition to a diverse imaginative literature, documented the nation's expansion to its modern continental borders, along with exploration of territory far beyond. Driven by belief in the "manifest destiny" of Americans to bring liberty to new lands, narratives of empire ranged from the heroic to the fantastic, and they spawned a popular frontier literature that created some of the most enduring myths of America. At the same time, expansion provoked a corresponding literature of dispossession by American Indians and Mexicans that combined protest with statements of pride and independence.

Accompanying expansion was the contentious and ultimately tragic debate over slavery carried out in a voluminous proslavery and antislavery literature that took the form of speeches, pamphlets, autobiography, poetry, and fiction. By juxtaposing the literature of slavery with the literatures of exploration and the frontier, *Empire and Slavery* traces the formative features of the national image of the United States.

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